

ON TRACK WITH MDT

July 2002

As we all know, traffic crashes occur daily in Montana, causing injuries, deaths and an estimated \$677 million in annual economic losses to this state – and that's without including an estimate for lives lost or suffering endured as a result of these accidents. Any way we look at it, the costs are staggering.

What are the major issues facing us regarding traffic safety? Over the years they have been, and continue to be, the lack of use/misuse of safety restraints; the improper use of alcohol and/or drugs when driving; and a steady rise in risks to drivers, passengers, pedestrians, motorcyclists and bicyclists because of increased use of Montana's roadway system.

Historically, MDT's Traffic Safety Bureau has been charged with addressing these issues on behalf of the Governor's Office. Through the combined efforts of state, local and federal officials, Montana has made tremendous gains in highway safety, including attaining a 76 percent rate of seat belt usage statewide – one of the highest secondary success rates in the country – and a marked increase in public awareness of intoxication issues. However, Montana still has many hurdles to cross if we are to reduce the risks that endanger our travelers, and it will take the efforts of both the state and the public to make those changes happen.

One way that MDT's Traffic Safety Bureau is helping bring about change is by overseeing the state's annual Traffic Safety Plan, or TSP. By September 1 of each year, the Governor's Representative for Highway Safety, currently from MDT, forwards the proposed TSP to the regional administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), who reviews it with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). These two agencies, both part of the U.S. Department of Transportation, review and approve the proposed activities and costs for 1) appropriateness, and 2) eligible expenditures for federal funds. Everyone from local police and county sheriffs to state, federal, tribal and community agencies has a role in developing and implementing the Traffic Safety Plan, and funds are distributed to participating agencies according to the approved TSP.

The current TSP includes the following goals:

- ◆ reducing Montana's traffic fatality rate to 2.0 or fewer deaths per 100 million Vehicle Miles Traveled, or VMT, by 2005 (it was 2.40 in 2000).
- ◆ maintaining alcohol and other drug-related crashes below a rate of 10 percent of all crashes through 2005 (it was 9.9 percent in 2000 but has run as high as 22.3 percent in 1983).

- ◆ averaging 6,000 DUI convictions and 16,000 seat belt citations over three years by 2005 (there were 5,787 DUI convictions and 14,527 seat belt citation convictions in 2000).
- ◆ achieving a safety restraint use of 80 percent under current law, or a use rate of 87 percent if the current secondary law is changed to a primary law, by 2005 (as noted above, we're at a 76 percent usage rate under current law).
- ◆ increasing to 20 Safe Community programs and facilitating the development and implementation of more than two projects each by 2003 (Montana currently has 17 such programs statewide).
- ◆ improving a variety of services ranging from the statewide traffic records system to emergency medical services and so forth.

As always, public education and the cooperation of officials and community agencies is key to achieving these goals, and I appreciate the efforts of the many individuals, agencies and organizations who have dedicated resources to making our roads a safer venue. With the Governor's focus on issues such as seat belt enforcement, .08 Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) legislation and the need to 1) prohibit open containers in motor vehicles and 2) require stiffer penalties for repeat DUI offenders, those efforts are more important than ever, and they are key to staying "on track with MDT."

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